Uyghur Khaganate

ROMAN K. KOVALEV
The College of New Jersey, USA

The Uyghur Khaganate (Uyğur, Uyghur, or Uighur Khaganate/Qaganate) or the Orxon Uyghur Empire (744–840), established and run politically by the Turkic-speaking Uyghur pastoral nomads, was one of the largest empires in medieval Eurasia and at its height stretched from the Fergana Valley in central Asia to eastern Mongolia. Like many other Inner Asian pastoral nomadic peoples, the Uyghurs derived from the Hsiung-nu political union (209 BCE–c.100 CE). Part of the T'ieh-lê tribal union, as a result of conflicts with the Jou-Jan Khaganate (330–552), they were divided into two groups: one in the Orxon–Selenga River valleys (On Uyghur) and the other in the Altai-T'ien-shan range area (Toquz Uyghur). Together, they comprised a Toquz Oguz tribal confederation, at the head of which stood the Yaglaqar Uyghur charismatic clan. By the 8th century, the latter name developed into an ethnonym, applied to the Toquz Oguz tribes. When vassals of the Eastern Türk Khaganate (552–630), and for some time thereafter, the Uyghurs developed close contacts with Tang China (618–907) and appear to have accepted their overlordship. With the advent of the Second Türk Khaganate (682–742), the Uyghurs were again absorbed into the imperial Türk orbit. But, several years after the collapse of the Khaganate, thanks in large part to the Uyghurs, they took the imperial lead in eastern and central Eurasian politics by establishing their own Khaganate, the highest form of Turkic political organization (i.e., empire). Establishing their capital Ordu Baliq (Balıq) in the sacred Orxon lands and switching their ruler's title from Yabgu to Qagan, the Uyghurs made a clear statement of their political orientation toward the core Mongol territories formerly held by the eastern Türkic qagans and their aspirations to the imperial title.

On becoming masters of a huge territory stretching from the southern Gobi in the south, to western Manchuria in the east, to the Altai-Tuva region (nominally including the Kimek Irtysh and Qirgiz Yenisei territories) in the northwest, and eastern Turkestan to the borders of Qarluq country in the west, the Uyghurs found themselves in a key position to participate in major power politics in central and eastern Eurasia, which involved Tang China, the Tibetan Empire (618–842), and various other Turkic states and tribal confederations. With its heartlands situated in Mongolia, the Uyghur Khaganate was also ideally located for developing commercial ties with China to its south; the Bohai/P'o-hai kingdom (698–926) of Manchuria–Russian Far East–North Korea to its east; Sogdia (Soġdia) and the Islamic civilization to its west; and, the various Uralic and Palaeo-Siberian hunter-gatherer tribes to its north.

Central and eastern Eurasia witnessed several major realignments in their commercial relations during the second half of the 8th century. As a prelude and most probably the cause of this reorientation was the An Lushan Rebellion in China that began in 755, which led China to begin its withdrawal from central Asia. Other regional powers came to replace the Tang in fulfilling the commercial transit role along the key central sectors of the Silk Roads that ran from China to central Asia via the Gansu Pass and the southern Tarim Basin in eastern Turkestan, namely

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the Tibetans and the newly established Uyghur Khaganate. Thus, the vital route stretching from Hami to the Gansu Corridor of the Jade Gate and the key regions of Dunhuang and Lop Nor and the cities of Besbaliq (Beiting/Tingzhou/Pei-t'ing), Kucha, Qoco, and Khotan were taken by the Tibetans from the Tang between 763 and the mid-790s. After 763, China had no direct contacts with central Asia. During these turbulent decades, trade along this traditional segment of the Silk Road appears to have declined.

During the reign of Qutlug Qagan (795–808), the Uyghurs took Turfan and extended their empire west to Fergana, including the earlier recapture of Bedbalıq in Turfan from the Tibetans in 792. Under the following qagan, Ay Tengride (808–821), the Uyghurs also captured Kuchâ, Qoco, and Kashgar. In the first quarter of the 9th century, Uyghur armies were operating on several occasions deep in Transoxiana, to as far west as the Syr Darya in Soġdia. However, for a number of decades of the latter half of the 8th century the Uyghurs had to find an alternative to the classic central section of the Silk Roads, a route that bypassed the Tibetan-held regions, that led to Soġdiana, their key trading partners in western central Asia. This route came to be known as the "Uyghur Road." Its eastern branch passed from Tang territories northwest via the mid-Yellow River and the northern borders of the Ordos to the Uyghur capital of Ordu Balıq. From this city on the upper Orxon, its western branch ran southwest via Lake Barkul to the Uyghur-held town of Besbaliq. This city lay along a key east–west route that led westward to Sogdia; but, because Gansu and the southern Tarim Basin were held by the Tibetans for much of the second half of the 8th century, the road was re-routed northward into the steppe and traversed via it westward all the way to Mirki/Barki (the first Sogdian outpost in the northeast) and then by way of Isbijab and Ṭaraz/Talas to the key Sogdian city of Chach/al-Shash.

By establishing this route, the Uyghurs not only found a way to circumvent the Tibetan lands, but also sought to establish a monopoly on trade between China and the steppe. This last goal was initially made possible by their successful wars against the Qirgiz and their allied neighbors to the west in the late 740s and 750s. With the Uyghur destruction of the Qirgiz army of 50 000 in 758, the latter were cut off from China. However, the Qirgiz developed westerly commercial relations that connected them to the Qarluqs (who came to control the central Asian lands of the Western Türk Khaganate by 766), Tibet, and eastern Turkestan. Consequently, two alternative north–south routes were forged by the Qirgiz and their neighbors that linked with the central Silk Road: the "Qirgiz Road" that led from the Minusinsk Basin–upper Yenisei south through the Qarluq steppe to Kucha and Qoco, and the "Kimak Road" that ran from the Irtysh via the Qarluq steppe to Yabgi-Kent and then to Uđrar/Farab in Isbijab district of Sogdia. In this way, the Uyghurs were unable to hold on to their steppe-route monopoly for long.

Sogdian merchants played a key role in Uyghur trade with China, as is testified by their presence in a caravan traveling from China to the Uyghur capital alongside Uyghur merchants carrying 100 000 silks in 780. No doubt, Sogdians were also the ones who carried the millions of pieces of Chinese silk westward, obtained by the Uyghurs from the Tang over the course of the Khaganate's existence. While Uyghur–Chinese trade may have been initiated soon after the Khaganate was established in 744, it boomed after 760 when the Chinese came to dispatch silks by the hundreds of thousands to the Uyghurs yearly with very few disruptions until their collapse in 840. In the early 820s, the Tang

annually forwarded half a million pieces of silk, if we are to believe Tamim b. Baḥr, the Arab emissary sent to the Khaganate in c.821.

To secure a steady and large volume of silks, the Uyghurs devised a number of methods for obtaining these textiles from the Middle Kingdom. One involved plunder and receiving payments for military services. Thus, between 757 and 763, the Uyghurs successfully assisted the Tang in their civil wars, which followed on the heels of the initial An Lushan Rebellion in 755. For their services of "liberating" the imperial cities, they were permitted to loot and pillage them (no doubt silks were the key commodity plundered). Under Bögü Qagan (759–779), the Uyghurs became the props of the Tang dynasty by becoming their guardians against rebellions and the Tibetans, which were secured by marital ties involving the dispatch of Chinese princesses to the Uyghurs. For their military services, they were paid in silks (e.g., 100 000 were given to them in 765).

Another method used to acquire silks was through forced trade. Being the military protectors of the Tang, beginning in 760 the Uyghurs used their position to systematically extort, behind the façade of trade, thousands of their horses (according to Chinese sources, not wanted and often decrepit nags) for Tang silks at 38–40 pieces per horse (e.g., in 780 100 000 pieces; in 827 200 000 or 500 000 pieces; in 829 230 000 pieces). To the horses may be added furs (sables), jade belts, camels, falcons, and other goods sent to the Tang. The Chinese chronicles wrote of these items as "tribute" from the Uyghurs who, in turn, viewed them as "gifts" that needed reciprocity, that is, forced trade. After 765, the Uyghurs living in the Tang capital also became economically prominent by acting as moneylenders, which most probably also added to their silk acquisitions, since silk in China at this time was used as currency. However, being wealthy "usurers," combined with their image of extortionists and arrogant people due to their importance in propping up the Tang, caused much disdain for the Uyghurs and, indeed, helped fuel xenophobia in the Middle Kingdom by the early 9th century. This phenomenon ran contrary to the otherwise very cosmopolitan Tang culture, one that initially absorbed many nomadic elements, from ideologies, worldviews, and aesthetics to the appreciation of wearing furs, eating stewed camel humps, and women parading on horseback through the streets of the imperial capital wearing felt pants, kaftans, and boots.

To maintain and perpetuate trade relations with the outside world, the Uyghurs developed a well-run infrastructure and urbanism. Already in the mid-7th century at the request of the Uyghurs the Tang erected 16 stations along what developed into the eastern branch of the "Uyghur Road." Soon after the advent of the Khaganate, Et-Etmish Bilge Qagan (747–759) constructed the capital Ordu Baliq in 757 and at about the same time "ordered" Sogdians and Chinese to build the city of Bay Baliq on the Selenga River. Indeed, ceramic roof tiles discovered in Tuva and Ordu Baliq are analogous to those crafted in Tang China, while the castles built in the Tuva region were constructed from typical bricks of the central and eastern central Asian tradition. The capital held temples, administrative buildings, market streets aligned by trades, 12 gates, and a central citadel where the Qagan's walled-in palace stood, atop of which the ruler's golden tent (which could hold 100 people) was located. Another city, Khökh Ordung, was located east of the Khangai Mountains in central Mongolia. More urban centers were erected west of the Eg River in north-central Mongolia. Further west was Tuva, which was taken by the Uyghurs in 750–751. This region functioned as the Khaganate's limes with their Qirgız neighbors. There the Uyghurs erected a strong line of

fortifications made up of 17 brick-made castles and interconnecting wooden walls. These rectangular and square fortresses had thick, high walls with massive towers and gates that were surrounded by deep and wide moats.

The support mechanism for travelers and permanent residents of Uyghur castles and cities was well developed. The discovery of hand-turned grain mills, iron plowshares, and millet at Uyghur castles and burials indicates that agriculture was known in this pastoral nomadic empire. Tamim b. Baḥr reports that the capital of the Uyghurs was "a great town, rich in agriculture and surrounded by rustaqs full of cultivation and villages lying close together …." Indeed, archaeological surveys of the city revealed a network of irrigation ditches that could have sustained agriculture in the Orxon plain. Linguistic evidence suggests that the Uyghurs borrowed the knowledge of making "wine from millet" (no doubt beer) from the Sogdians. Large numbers of horses, goats, sheep, camels, and cattle were also raised. Additional meat and raw materials for craft production were obtained through hunting red Siberian stags, wild rams, boar, fowl, bears, and other animals. Fishing also played a role in the economy. Craft production, whether in Uyghur or immigrant artisan's hands, involved: woodworking; horn, antler, and bone carving; pottery-making (handmade as well as wheel-turned); ironworking; copper-working (e.g., production of bronze mirrors); and cloth production.

Some products of the Khaganate were exported: items carved out of ivory (walrus or mammoth tusks) and heath-wood platters were carried to the Muslim lands. It is very likely that furs were also exported westward: the Arab writer al-Jaḥiẓ (d.869) noted in his work Tabassur that the best sables found in the Islamic world came from China, here most probably mistaking their Uyghur source for China. Indeed, since the Khaganate's northern territories were located at the edge of the Siberian forest zone, the Uyghurs had access to some of the finest furs available in Eurasia. Based on the finds of silks, beads, coins, and other imported objects north of the Tuva limes, western Baikal, and even deeper in Siberia, by way of trade the Uyghurs secured furs for their markets from the Uralic and Palaeo-Siberian hunter-gatherer peoples of the taiga. Thus, the "Uyghur Road" also served as a "Fur Road," not a minor function in light of the great demand for this luxury item across Afro-Eurasia during this period.

But, horses were no doubt their largest export item. Aside from receiving silks in exchange for them from China, the Uyghurs also imported tea, which became the fad in Tang China at this time, as well as ceramic dishware and neo-porcelains, bronze mirrors, and coins. Beads of various types (paste, glass, rock-crystal, cornelian) were also imported to the Khaganate from across Eurasia. However, it is not clear what balanced out Uyghurs' silk trade. It has been estimated that they received on average 300 000 rolls of raw silk per year from the Tang, in exchange for 7500 horses. Naturally, some part of this yearly silk intake was used by the Uyghurs themselves. Some they traded northward into Siberia. However, the majority of these textiles must have been exported westward by the Sogdians. What the Uyghurs received in return has not been documented in the written sources. Based on the discovery of various items made of gold and other non-ferrous metals in Uyghur burials, it can be assumed that they were, at least in part, paid with various luxury items. Presumably, another way the Sogdians compensated for the goods they acquired from the Uyghurs was by providing them with builders to construct and decorate their cities and castles, something that would have been very costly, but mutually beneficial.

Relying on the political mechanisms of their Türk predecessors and those imported

by the Sogdians, the Uyghurs developed a relatively sophisticated sedentary and nomadic government, with a fairly well-developed bureaucratic system. Contributing to political stability was the adoption of a vertical succession from father to son, which was atypical for the nomadic linear system. Qagan's huge military also helped: in the capital alone he had a standing army of 12 000 at the imperial central inner city, and his 17 chieftains each provided 13 000 more men in the outer city. The Uyghurs also had a horse-relay system of communications (like the later Cinggisid jam) as well as fiat money in the form of leather pieces to which seals of the Qagan were attached as guarantee of tender. Writing also contributed to administration. In fact, the Uyghurs had three alphabets, all borrowed: a variation of Sogdian (itself based on Aramaeo-Syriac); a Runic script, based on Indic Brahmî (which entered via the Tocharians); and, a Tibetan-based alphabet (also Indic in origin). The elite appear to have been literate and it is quite possible that the urban population was as well. Uyghur literature is plentiful and diverse, mostly religious: Manichaean, Nestorian Christian, and Buddhist.

The multiple roles played by the Sogdians in the Uyghur state cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, they acted as tutors to the Uyghurs in regard to trade, diplomacy, politics, material culture, writing, and religion. In turn, the Khaganate's success brought Sogdians profit. In this way, this was a symbiotic relationship. But, the most important Sogdian contribution was the introduction and perpetuation of their Manichaean faith, a religion that was generally persecuted at the time elsewhere other than in Sogdia. In c.762, Bögü Qagan converted to Manichaeism and soon thereafter introduced the religion to the Khaganate, most members of which presumably practiced the traditional Turkic Tengri (sky-god) faith. While Manichaeism was not uncontested by the ruling elite, and it is not clear what portion of the population practiced this religion outside of the urban centers, the choice to convert to it made much sense: it offered not only a more sophisticated belief system, which was required for a developing complex state, but also one that was theologically and politically neutral in relation to the other major rival powers in the region that practiced Buddhism and Islam.

The Uyghur Khaganate began to disintegrate after the death of Külüg Bilge Qagan (832–839). That year brought heavy snows, epidemics, famine, and epizootics that led to the death of much of the empire's livestock, the backbone of the economy. These natural disasters most probably were interpreted as the loss (heaven's withdrawal or removal) of the qaganal political-military "charisma" or qut and put in question the viability of the Khaganate itself as a sacred polity. The following year, 840, with the invitation of a turncoat general, 100 000 Qirgiz attacked and destroyed the capital of Ordu Baliq, killed the last Qagan, Wu-tsung/Lu-chi Qasar (838–840), and hence ended the Uyghur Empire. These events aside, it should be observed that the Uyghurs were victims of their own success: by becoming increasingly urban luxury consumers and divided by socio-economic-political differences, they turned away from the aspects of their culture that initially gave them strength – mobility, austerity, and a generally classless militarily powerful and united nomadic state. The collapse of the Khaganate also falls in line with the overall historical patterns of the other states in the region, as the Tibetan Empire crumbled two years afterward and the crippled Tang state limped on for two more generations. Hence, the fall of the Uyghur Khaganate has to be interpreted in the context of the much larger patterns of internal and external historical developments that occurred across central and eastern Eurasia in the period.

SEE ALSO: China, imperial: 4. Sui, Tang, and Five dynasties periods, c.581–960; Kimek Khaganate; Nomads; Parhae, Kingdom of; Steppe empires; Tibetan Empire

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